

Expedition to Stellwagen Bank and the Search for Ishmael



Bill & Maureen's Summer Adventure aboard Kalunamoo

The Stellwagen Bank Expedition and the Search for Ishmael, set sail from Barren Island on the clear morning of the 15th of August, 2009. Sailing East from Barren Island we were following the direction, if not the footsteps, of Ishmael on his journey from Manhattan to the whaling ports of New England.

We were sailing "down east". Since the predominate winds are from the south west, an easterly course from Barren Island out to Cape Cod and the Stellwagen Bank is mostly a down wind sail. Assuming of course the wind is more than 8-10 knots. If not, as in our case, it was more like a down wind motor trip. Ah, but that is why they invented motors!

Nonetheless, we had a pleasant motor/sail all day Saturday. Saturday night was a calm dark moonless night with flat seas. At day break on Sunday, South East Light atop Mohegan Bluffs on Adrian Block's Island was off our port beam as we adjusted course to Buzzards Bay. We kept watch for any leviathans of the deep but failed to see any. By early afternoon we dropped anchor in the secluded Kettle Cove on the west coast of Naushon Island. Naushon is one of the Elizabeth Islands off the South West coast of Cape Cod. Completely uninhabited, it provided a cool refreshing dip into the clear water and a secure overnight anchorage.

The next morning we set sail (and motor) to the little town of Onset. A word of caution. The head of Buzzards Bay is like the neck of a funnel and with the afternoon south west wind and seas hemmed in, ships and boats in or out bound from the Cape Cod Canal have a terrible time in the strong currents and heavy chop that develops there. It proved to be the worst of our passage.

Taking a mooring from Onset Bay Marina (\$31.00/night) we went ashore at the town dock and wondered if Ishmael ever walked the lanes of this small hamlet. He was not known to the proprietor of Mark Anthony's, an establishment where our first bowl of steamers were eaten. The next day at first light we sailed with the tide through the Cape Cod Canal.

With 8' tidal difference between the east and west end, 5

knot currents in the canal are the rule.

By afternoon, across a calm Cape Cod Bay, we dropped the hook in Provincetown Harbor. This corkscrew of a harbor is well protected but a thousand miles away there was a storm brewing with my name on it. Hurricane Bill was churning its way across the Atlantic. We estimated that we had time, in the next few days, to reach our destination, Stellwagen Bank, and actually sail with the possibility of seeing creatures as large as our ketch. But first we went ashore, where it was carnival time.

The Summer of Love was at the height of its festivities as Prov-

incetown and its alternate life style was on full display. I wondered what Ishmael would have thought of all of this. It was New England's version of Greenwich Village and South Beach all rolled into one. Would you like your pink flamingo drink with your lobster roll now?

With a hurricane coming we elected to sail out to the Bank in lieu of attending the carnival parade. It was a gorgeous day as we headed for the Bank, which is also a marine sanctuary, about 5 miles off the tip of Cape Cod. It extends to the coast of Maine. We kept our eye on the whale watching boats coming out of Provincetown and tracked them to the east side of the bank.

A gigantic sea turtle was spotted as we headed north in pursuit of the whales. Off about a mile and half the whale boats stopped and we could see through binoculars whales breaching along side them. They must have been putting on some show. We headed in their direction but realized it would be like chasing schools of blue fish. We never did get up close but were satisfied that we did get to see them from a distance. They are definitely there and hopefully will be for some time not only for our next trip but even for our grand-kids.

We returned to Provincetown Harbor for the night and slept under the same stars that, a few miles away, the whales could see. It was very peaceful.

At daybreak we weighed anchor for the start of the westbound trip home. Stopping in Vineyard Haven and Block Island we never did find Ishmael although in the Black Dog Tavern on the Vineyard, pictures of old whalers abound. Maybe he was among them. I think he would be pleased to know that there are still whales to be seen. I know I was.

End note: Hurricane Bill passed east of the Cape while we were secure at an Onset mooring. Other than heavy rain around midnight, the storm did not affect us at all.